LDS Growth Case Studies

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Worldwide LDS Outreach Among Iranians

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Overview

Iran is the world's 18th most populous country with 78.9 million inhabitants. Like many countries in the world, there are millions of Iranians who live abroad primarily in Asia, Europe, and North America. Although Farsi (Iranian Persian or Western Farsi) is the official language and most commonly spoken first language in Iran, there are several additional languages spoken by over one million people including Azerbaijani, Kurdish, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Luri, and Balochi. Farsi is closely related to other Persian dialects including Dari (Eastern Farsi) spoken as a first language by approximately 15 million people in Afghanistan and Tajik (Tajiki Persian) spoken as a first language by over five million people in Tajikistan. The estimated number of native speakers of Farsi worldwide is approximately 50 million.

The number of Farsi speakers per country provides one of the most reliable methods for ascertaining the number of Iranians per country as many countries do not publish information on country-of-origin for immigrants, permanent residents, and migrant workers. In the Middle East, there are 11 countries that have over an estimated 50,000 Farsi speakers including Iran (42 million), Turkey (609,000), Iraq (496,000), the United Arab Emirates (407,000), Qatar (194,000), Israel (184,300), Bahrain (177,000), Kuwait (118,000), Oman (76,000), and Syria (59,000). In Europe, there are five countries that have over an estimated 50,000 Farsi speakers including Russia (124,000), Germany (98,000), the United Kingdom (80,000), France (63,000), and Sweden (52,000).[1] In Japan, there are an estimated 51,000 Farsi speakers.[2] In Australia, there are an estimated 92,000 Farsi speakers. In the United States, there are approximately 360,000 Farsi speakers.[3] In Canada, there are approximately 155,000 Farsi speakers according to the 2006 census; approximately half of which reside in Toronto.[4]

This case study reviews past LDS missionary efforts among Iranians worldwide and identifies successes, opportunities, and challenges for growth. A comparative growth section compares LDS outreach efforts among Iranians with other proselytizing groups. A future prospects section predicts the outlook for future LDS growth among Iranians worldwide.

LDS Background

The first record instance of missionary activity among Iranians occurred in the 1970s in Iran. In the 1950s, the Church organized its first official branch in Iran and officially began passive proselytism efforts in the 1970s. In 1975, the Church assigned 18 missionaries to Iran,[5] organized the Iran Tehran Mission, and baptized the first Iranian convert.[6] Approximately 15 Iranians joined the Church prior to the closure of the mission in early 1979.[7] The Iranian Revolution instigated the closure of all LDS units in Iran and removal of missionaries. Most Iranian Latter-day Saints either immigrated to North America or Europe or remained in Iran and lost contact with the Church. Since the early 1980s, the Church has taught and baptized small numbers of Iranians throughout the world primarily in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. In 1983, the Church published a Farsi translation of select passages of the Book of Mormon.[8] There did not appear to be any formal outreach efforts specifically targeting Iranians during the 1980s, 1990s, and the early and mid 2000s.

In the late 2000s, the Church began Iranian-specific missionary programs in southern California and Toronto, Canada. Returned missionaries in the California Anaheim Mission reported that the Church briefly extended Farsi-specific outreach until regional church leadership discontinued the program, citing safety concerns for formerly Muslim converts. Returned missionaries indicated that following the closure of the program, the mission president had to approve the distribution of Farsi translations of the Book of Mormon to Iranian investigators. However, by the early 2010s it did not appear that these restrictions were in place. Missionaries serving in Toronto, Canada reported that there were two areas that had Farsi-speaking

missionaries assigned by the late 2000s. In mid-2011, missionaries reported that approximately 25 of the 100 Iranian members in one ward in the Toronto area attended church regularly and that approximately half of recent converts were active. At the time, Farsi translations of sacrament meeting services and a Farsi-speaking Sunday school class were held in at least one ward in the Toronto area.

In early 2013, the Church appeared to operate only one official Farsi-speaking outreach program in the world based in the Canada Toronto Mission. Missionaries have reported that Iranians have joined the Church in at least 10 countries including Canada, Ecuador, France, Germany, Italy,[9] South Korea, Sweden, Ukraine, the United States, and the United Kingdom and that Iranians have received missionary lessons in five additional countries including Armenia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, and Portugal. The Church has published some Farsi translations of church materials and missionary resources online, including an "I'm a Mormon" video on a Iranian-Pakistani convert discussing the role of her faith in her family and personal life.[10]

Successes

The Church has experienced good receptivity among Iranians compared to other traditionally Muslim ethnic groups notwithstanding strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam, Iran experiencing some of the lowest levels of religious freedom in the world for over three decades, and a lack of coordinated outreach among Iranians worldwide with the exception of the Canada Toronto Mission. The baptism of hundreds of Iranians worldwide stands as a major achievement due to mission and area leaders discouraging proselytism among traditionally Muslim ethnic groups out of respect to traditional customs and safety concerns. Notwithstanding higher receptivity to the Church among Iranians compared to other traditionally Muslim ethnic groups, receptivity remains lower than most other ethnic groups. Mission leaders have carefully evaluated the baptism of Iranian investigators to avoid potential safety concerns that may arise for conversion from Islam. Oftentimes mission presidents will not permit Iranians to join the Church unless they pledge to not return to Iran unless drastic changes occur in the current political situation that promote religious freedom and the protection of human rights for non-Muslims. Several Iranian members have served full-time missions in several different countries, strengthening their testimonies in the Church and helping them further integrate into their local LDS communities.

The Church has utilized technology and has been thrifty in providing sporadic outreach among Iranians worldwide from church media efforts as well as ordinary members and full-time missionaries. Missionaries have been resourceful and diligent in teaching and baptizing Iranians notwithstanding many challenges. For example, missionaries in Sweden have utilized online translating websites to communicate with Farsi-speaking investigators that cannot adequately communicate in a language spoken by missionaries. Missionaries have utilized Iranian members in teaching monolingual Farsi-speaking Iranians which has provided greater socialization opportunities and member-missionary activity. The Church has posted an "I'm a Mormon" video in English that features an Iranian convert; a resource that can be utilized for English-speaking Iranians in helping them reconcile perceived incompatibilities between their culture and the LDS Church.

The Church has translated select passages of the Book of Mormon, the old edition of Gospel Principles, general conference addresses, and a few proselytism materials such as the Articles of Faith and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith into Farsi. These resources have been vital in missionary efforts among Iranians worldwide. Missionaries in many missions in Europe, North America, Australia, and East Asia frequently order the Farsi translation of the Book of Mormon for investigators which has been crucial toward ensuring long-lasting conversion.

Opportunities

Religious freedom permits proselytism among Iranians in several countries with over 50,000 Farsi speakers in Europe, North America, Australia, and Japan but the Church has only initiated formal missionary activity targeting Iranians in Toronto, Canada and briefly in the California Anaheim Mission. Alienation from Iranian culture disrupts many traditional attitudes and behaviors that would render outreach among Iranians within their home country unfeasible due to societal and governmental restrictions on conversion from Islam. Consequently, Iranians who live abroad offer exciting opportunities for outreach as they have exhibited some interest in studying the Church and the repercussions for converting from Islam are less severe than in their homeland. Furthermore, Iranian converts in many locations can receive support and socialization opportunities with fellow members. Individual missions and congregations can hold cottage meetings and organize Sunday School classes or dependent units conducted in Farsi if there are sufficient numbers of members and investigators. The greatest opportunities for reaching Iranians in countries with religious freedom center on building the Church with current Iranian members in conjunction with full-time missionaries and local church leaders. For instance, Farsi-speaking members in Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States can teach a Sunday school class and accompany full-time missionaries for fellowshipping Iranian investigators and less-active members.

Baha'i Iranians present interesting and unique opportunities for proselytism. Founded in Persia during the nineteenth century, the Baha'i Faith shares many similarities with the teachings and history of the LDS Church such as the importance of prophets in revealing truth, additional books of scripture, strict adherence to moral laws such as chastity, and persecution by other religions and governments. Currently there are an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 Baha'is in Iran[11] accounting for 0.4% of the national population and over seven million Baha'i worldwide. The Church does not have any specific proselytism materials adapted to those with a Baha'i religious background. Assuming the prevalence of Baha'is in Iran is comparable to Iranian populations elsewhere, most countries with sizable Iranian populations likely have only a few thousand Baha'i Iranians at most, with most Baha'i constituting other ethnicities. Full-time missionaries have taught Baha'is in many countries and report that they

are open to discussing religion and receiving missionary lessons but exhibit little interest in joining the Church.

The assignment of the handful of Iranian members who serve full-time missions to locations with sizable Iranian populations has good potential for accelerating growth and establishing a permanent LDS community among Iranians in additional locations. There appears to be extremely few, if any, Iranian Latter-day Saints who have served missions in locations with sizable Iranian populations. The familiarity of many Iranian Latter-day Saints with Iranian culture, language, and Islam provide opportunities for tailoring outreach to the unique needs and circumstances of Iranians abroad. Special consideration by mission planners and international church leadership would be required to consistently assign Iranian Latter-day Saint missionaries to locations favorable for specialized outreach.

Challenges

There are no Farsi-designated wards or branches in the Church notwithstanding hundreds of Iranian Latter-day Saints worldwide. A lack of language-specific units creates many challenges for the Church to effectively develop a sense of community among Iranians and creates challenges attracting interest among nonmembers that cannot speak English fluently or with enough competency to have meaningful spiritual experiences attending church in a second language. Church leaders have been inconsistent in enforcing mission policies regarding the baptism of formerly Muslim converts, resulting in additional challenges providing steady outreach and retaining new converts. Member activity rates appear as low as 25% in locations with the highest concentrations of Iranian Latter-day Saints, possibly due to a combination of these issues.

Countries with the largest Iranian populations outside Iran do not have an official church presence or experience religious freedom restrictions that prohibit non-Islamic proselytism. Turkey is the only country in the Middle East with over 50,000 Farsi speakers and proselytizing LDS missionaries assigned. However, only Istanbul has proselytizing missionaries and there appear to be no Iranian converts in any of the four branches in Turkey. There are only three countries with over 100,000 Farsi speakers with an official LDS presence where LDS missionaries can openly proselyte, namely the United States, Canada, and Russia. The extent of LDS outreach permits realistic proselytism efforts only in the United States and Canada due to a tiny church presence in Russia. Most other countries accessible to LDS missionaries with a visible Iranian population are unlikely to have formal missionary programs targeting Iranians due to the relatively small numbers of Iranians and a lack of ethnic-specific outreach for other larger ethnic minority groups that exhibit higher receptivity.

Safety concerns present genuine challenges for engaging in proselytism activity among ethnic groups like Iranians that exhibit strong ethnoreligious ties to Islam. Threats against the physical integrity of converts and their families have occurred and have prompted some members to move away from family and friends. Conversion from Islam generally corresponds with converts accepting that they may never return to Iran due to potential government and societal persecution. These conditions have generated many stalwart converts who have greatly contributed to building up the Church with fellow Iranians but have also deterred some converts from fully living church teachings and openly discussing their religion.

The Church has no materials translated into the major minority languages of Iran. Combined with the relatively small numbers of Iranians who have joined the Church worldwide, there appears to be few, if any, non-Farsi speaking Iranians who have joined the LDS Church. It is unclear how ethnic minority groups traditionally from Iran will react to prospective outreach if missionary work occurs in their native language and outside their homeland.

Comparative Growth

Jehovah's Witnesses extend some of the most penetrating outreach among Iranians worldwide. Witnesses operate Farsi-speaking congregations and groups in at least 16 countries including Germany (five congregations, 16 groups), the United Kingdom (three congregations, eight groups), the United States (three congregations, six groups), Belgium (one congregation, three groups), Sweden (one congregation, two groups), France (one congregation, one group), Austria (four groups), Denmark (four groups), Switzerland (four groups), Canada (two groups), the Netherlands (two groups), Australia (one group), Finland (one group), Greece (one group), Norway (one group), and Ukraine (one group). Evangelicals report Farsi-speaking churches in Canada, approximately two dozen states in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and several European countries. Evangelicals have utilized social media such as Facebook to increase awareness of missionary efforts among Iranians as individual churches oftentimes have their own individual Facebook groups or webpages. Seventh Day Adventists are one of the only nontraditional Christian groups that continue to operate in Iran, reporting 29 members, one church, and one company in 2010.[12] In 2009, Adventists opened their first Farsi-speaking church in Glendale, California. As of early 2013, Adventists did not appear to operate any additional Farsi-speaking congregations.[13]

Future Prospects

The outlook for future church growth among Iranians worldwide appears mixed as only one mission extends concentrated outreach among Iranians with Farsi-speaking missionaries, the strong ethnoreligious tie of Iranians to Islam, and mission and area leaders implementing inconsistent policies regarding the teaching and baptism of formerly Muslim investigators. A Farsi translation of the entire Book of Mormon, the formation of Farsi-speaking groups and branches, and standardized procedure in the teaching, baptism, and retention of formerly Muslim converts has good potential to accelerate church growth in areas with sizable numbers of Iranians that experience sufficient religious freedom to permit conversion from Islam. There are good opportunities to extend Iranian-specific outreach in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and a few European

countries but it appears unlikely that mission planners will open additional programs due to safety concerns and relatively low receptivity.

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